The Most Ornery Boys in Fairbury History

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According to Alma Lewis James (1899-1979), a Fairbury historian, the most ornery boys in Fairbury's history were the McDowell boys. In her ***Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars*** book, Alma Lewis James recounts many of the sometimes humorous antics of the McDowell boys.

The father of these three young hooligans was Isaac P. McDowell. He was an Elder of the Methodist Church. Isaac was a tall, thin man with a bald head and chin whiskers. A person who remembered him described him briefly as a "sanctimonious old coot". He left his religion in his pew. On weekdays, he busily wrung a fortune from a reluctant world with tombstones, real estate, banking, or anything else that came to hand. He was widely considered to drive better than a shrewd bargain, but he displayed the most amazing gullibility about his boys.

The oldest of the three McDowell boys was "Tommy", Thomas Scott O'Neil (TSO) McDowell(1858-1911). The middle brother was Elmer E. McDowell (1862-1918), and he was remembered as the ringleader of the three boys. The youngest brother was John Van McDowell (1864-1917).

Alma Lewis James reported that the Fairbury boys did not like the Pontiac boys coming to Fairbury and trying to steal away their girl friends. The McDowell boys were particularly hard on the Pontiac boys, who, unlike themselves, had the reputation of being quite fancy dressers, because they wore light plug hats and stylish suits when they came to Fairbury.

The first time the McDowell boys caught a Pontiac boy visiting a Fairbury girl's house, they let him off with a warning, since it was considered that ignorance was the cause of the mistake. If the same Pontiac boy committed a second offense, they waited until he had reached his destination, and there in plain sight, while he paused to wipe the dust off his shoes with his pocket handkerchief, they peppered him with rotten eggs.

One dose of the rotten eggs was usually sufficient to keep the Pontiac boy clear from Fairbury, but if his bravery exceeded his discretion, and he came the third time, he got the stuffed club treatment, which was sure to be conclusive.

The stuffed club was a weapon invented by the McDowell brothers. It was a canvas sack, six inches in diameter and twelve inches long. It was tightly stuffed with excelsior and coarse salt and tied to a two-foot stick. As a weapon, it had range, weight, and flexibility, and quite easily knocked a man unconscious.

The McDowell brothers were famous in Fairbury for the trick they pulled on their own father at the Methodist Church. One Sunday, after he finished preaching, Isaac McDowell went to the hitching rack in front of the church to drive his horse team home. But one by one, his wagon wheels would fall off, and so, dressed in his Sunday best, he would wrestle them back in place.

His boys never raised a finger to help him, but they did express the profoundest sympathy, wondering loudly who could have done such a cowardly thing to such a nice older man. The McDowell boys gave

repeat performances of this, undoubtedly by popular request, varying it with the times they hid the taps under the back seat cushions so that the wheels kept coming off all the way home.

The McDowell boys also exchanged the wheels, front with back, on the Baptist minister's carriage. It caused no damage, but since the rear wheels were typically larger, the buggy's new angle discombobulated the horse and upset the preacher's dignity.

Every boy in Fairbury looked forward to the annual visit by the circus. Often, boys would try to sneak under the tent to avoid paying the admission fee. One year, the McDowell boys did not care for the circus performance they watched. The circus tent had been pitched on a vacant lot next to the railroad.

A TP&W freight train had stopped and was switching on the tracks. The McDowell boys tied some of the tent ropes to the end of the train caboose. When the train pulled out, the tent went right along with it, leaving behind a stunned audience and troupe of performers beneath the stars.

Alma Lewis James recounted that Fairbury became infamous to TP&W passengers upon their arrival at the train depot. It got so that on the passenger trains, moving on again into Fairbury after the stop at the mines for coal, had their brakemen go through the coaches, bawling: "Fairbury! Fairbury! Pull your windows down!"

The initiated complied immediately, but the innocents who wondered what all the fuss was about and hesitated until the train had reached the depot, were caught slam in the face with a well—aimed pie.

Blackberry or raspberry pies obtained from the railroad restaurant were the favorite missiles, as the results from these were particularly spectacular, but a brush full of paint or whitewash swiped across a victim's face was almost as good, or even a stick with a blob of "car dough" on it. ("Dough" was the hard grease in the wheel box of the railroad cars.)

Sometimes, if the passengers were too wary, all of the train windows remained closed. Then the McDowell boys would stage a rousing fight, with much yelling and arm-swinging. Human curiosity can stand just so much, and so the windows would go up again. The heads would pop out to see what was going on, and the McDowell boys would stop the fake fight and begin throwing pies at the passengers. In a few minutes, another train with its luckless passengers would pull out to spread the news afar, their feelings in no way modified by the howls of laughter from the depot loafers.

Halloween time in Fairbury was a pure nightmare. Most of the day following was spent hunting for scattered personal property around town. Certain things were automatically expected: the wandering front gate, the overturned privy, the vegetables and the dead cats scattered on the front porch, and the missing sections of boardwalks and fences.

The McDowell boys were credited with one of the most interesting Halloween pranks. One morning after Halloween night, the owner of a wagon woke up to find the farm wagon on top of the schoolhouse roof. It took real work to get that wagon apart, hoist it piece by piece, and reassemble it up there against the stars; and much more work later, and at a price, to get it down again. To the maddened owner, it was anything but a joke.

One year, Elder Isaac McDowell sponsored a Methodist minister conference at the Methodist Church in Fairbury. The Methodist ministers of the surrounding country had met at Fairbury to transact annual church business and to be assigned to their new pulpits.

It was customary for the members of a local church to take one or more of the visiting clergy-men to their homes for the night, and so Isaac McDowell, being an Elder, invited a couple of the visitors to go home with him. They had another meeting after supper, and as the men walked back to the church after dark, the boys slipped up behind them and walloped the visitors with a piece of rubber hose.

Their victims knew enough about the town and the reputation of the McDowell boys that they made specific accusations, which the Elder denied in horror. For proof, they all rushed back to the house where they found the McDowell boys, even at that early hour, sound "asleep" in bed.

The McDowell boys performed most of their antics in the 1870s and 1880s. In those days, there were very few productive activities to occupy young people in their spare time. There were no radios, televisions, computers, or cell phones. The McDowell boys likely entertained Fairbury residents with their mischievous adventures.

The McDowell boys were infamous for pelting newly arriving TP&W train passengers with pies when the train entered the Fairbury station.

One year, the three McDowell brothers did not like the circus performance they saw. They tied some of the tent ropes onto the caboose of the TP&W freight train, and when the train left, it took the circus tent with it.